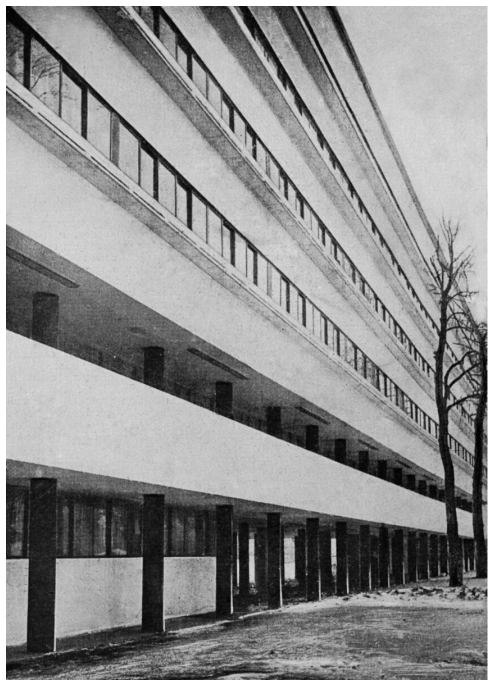
The Architectural Review

Making sense of Narkomfin

2 OCTOBER 2017 | BY ALLA VRONSKAYA | ESSAYS | READING TIME: 6 MINUTES



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Translated into English for the first time, Moisei Ginzburg's 'Dwelling' reveals the real significance of his architectural masterpiece

One of the most celebrated buildings of Soviet Modernism, the Narkomfin, has recently received significant attention from scholars, architects, activists and the media, partly in an effort to save the building from imminent ruin and partly to devise a comprehensive restoration programme. *Dwelling*, first published in Russian in 1934, summarises the research of its author – the architect and leading theoretician of Soviet Constructivism, Moisei Ginzburg (1892-1946) – on developing architecture for modern, technological and socialist society based on principles of standardisation and efficiency.

In 1929, Ginzburg headed the Section of Typification *(Sektsia Tipizatsii)* of the Construction Committee *(Stroikom)* of the Economic Council of Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR), an organisation created a year earlier with the purpose of 'general regulation and rationalisation of construction in the territory of the RSFSR'. Its goals included developing legal regulations for architecture and construction, elaborating standardised solutions for various types of buildings, and performing calculus research for the construction industry. It was responsible for developing types for standardised construction (including construction methods and minimum requirements) and the construction of prototype buildings. *Dwelling* is a statement of this research in one area: residential construction.

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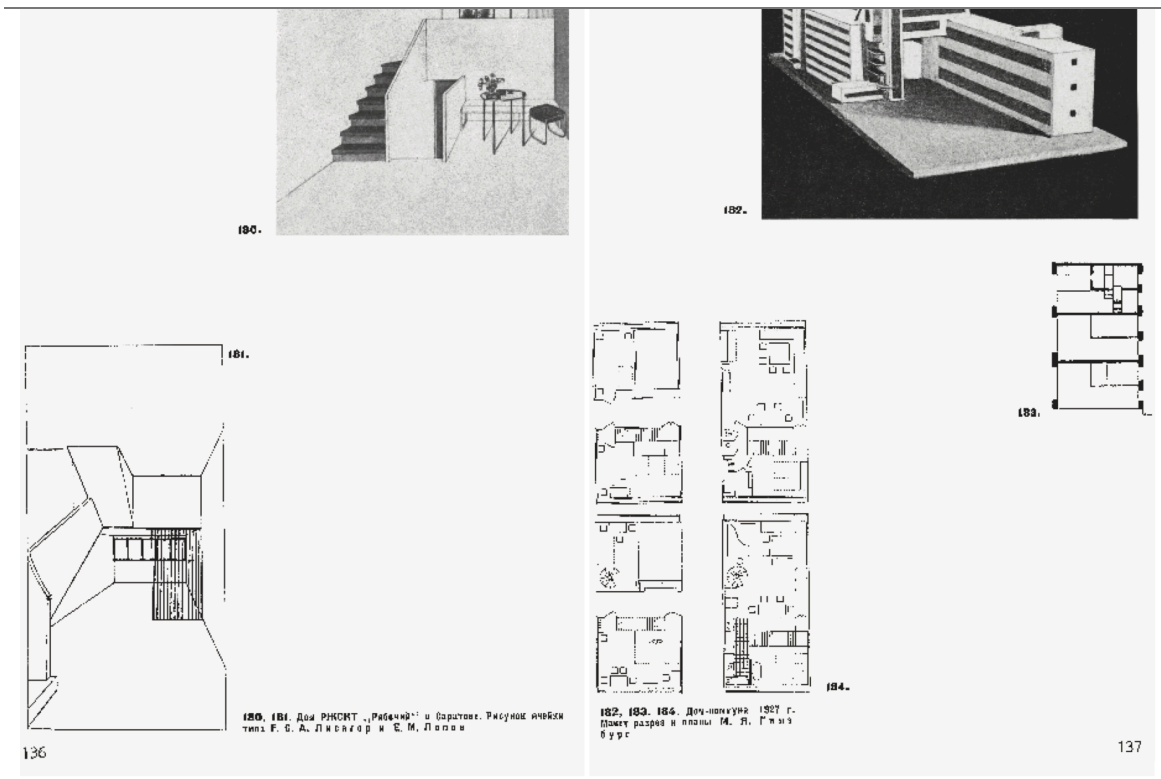
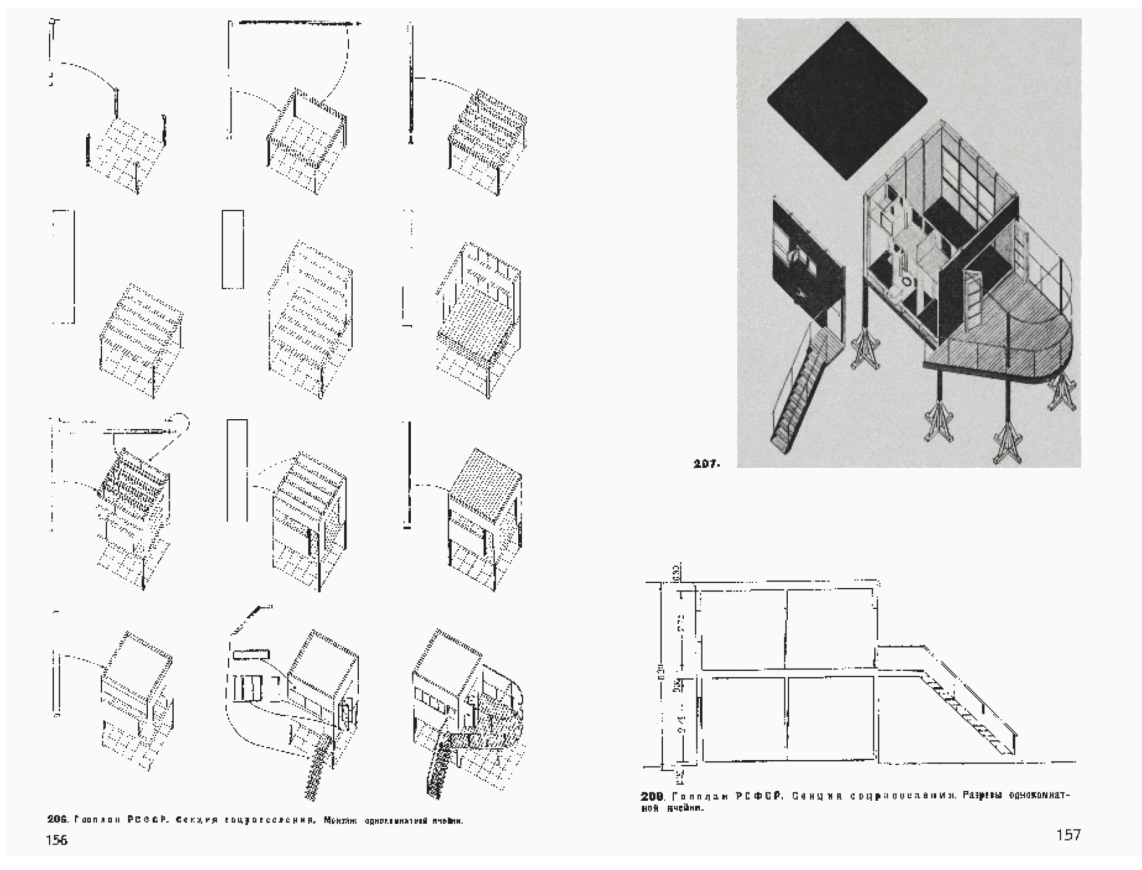


Spread from chapter 'Experimental Construction of Transitional-Type Houses'



Spread from chapter 'The First Posing of the Problem of Socialist Housing'

The work of Stroikom responded to the international turning of Modernist architects towards an interconnected set of concerns in respect of urbanism, mass housing and standardisation. Ginzburg was, not coincidentally, the Soviet delegate to Congrès International d'Architecture Moderne (CIAM) from its foundation in 1928 until 1932. Unlike many of his Western colleagues, he sought to reconcile the imperative of economy with respect for the dignity of the resident. Ginzburg's ambition was far greater than simply developing a Soviet model of an economical architecture of *Existenzminimum*. His programme, in other words, was the humanisation of Modernism, which he saw in contemporary, experimental psychology – studying the effects of space, form, colour and light on the mindset and the emotional wellbeing of the human, while conducting his own experiments within the framework of Stroikom.

So the scope and ambition of *Dwelling* significantly transcends technical solutions for standardised residential construction. Rather, it serves as a manifesto of Ginzburg's views on collective forms of domestic living and the design of their architectural containers, the latter driven by the Modernist economic imperative of efficiency. Tracing connections between architectural form on the one hand and family and social structures on the other, the research of precedents covered rich anthropological and historical material. Examples ranged from African villages to Tatar architecture in Crimea, to traditional Japanese houses, to medieval European dwellings and recent German *Siedlungen*. Studying them first hand, Ginzburg analysed spatial layouts, inhabitation patterns and technological advances to conclude that 'between the eclecticism of architects serving the bourgeois vanity of the ordinary person and the narrowly pragmatic primitivism

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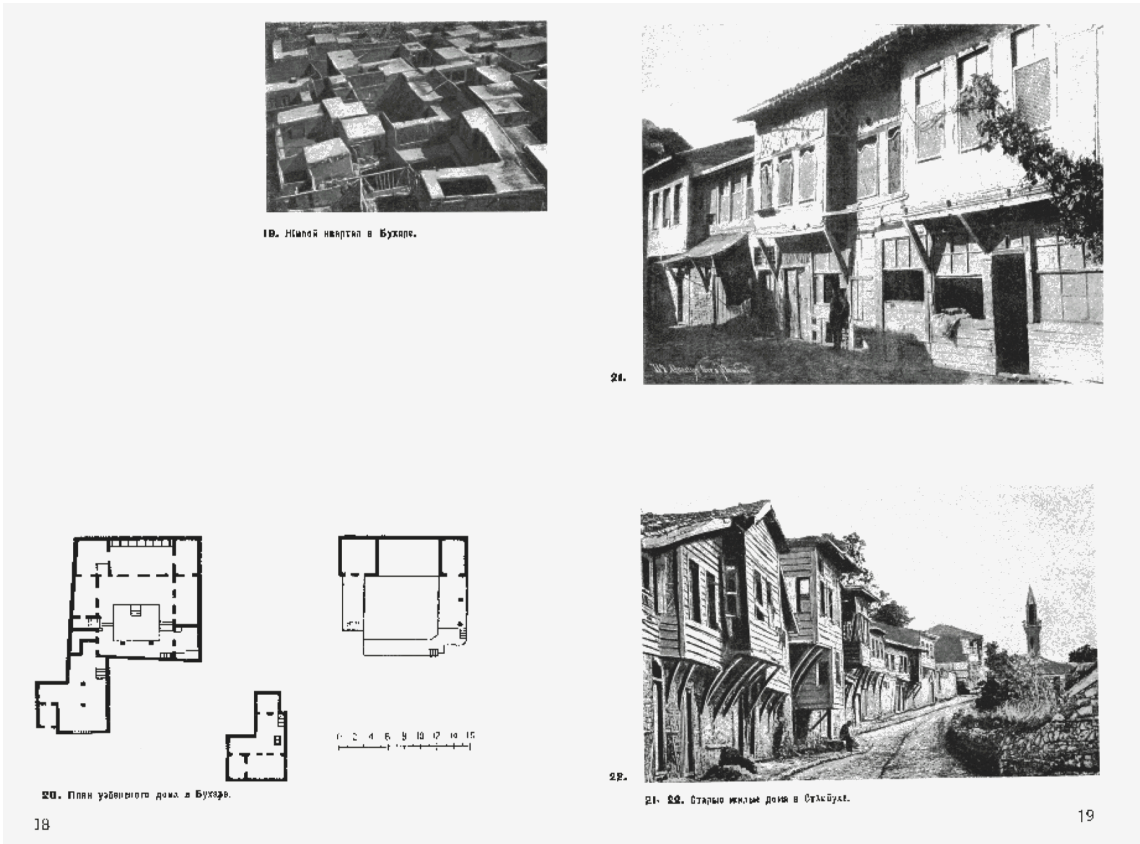

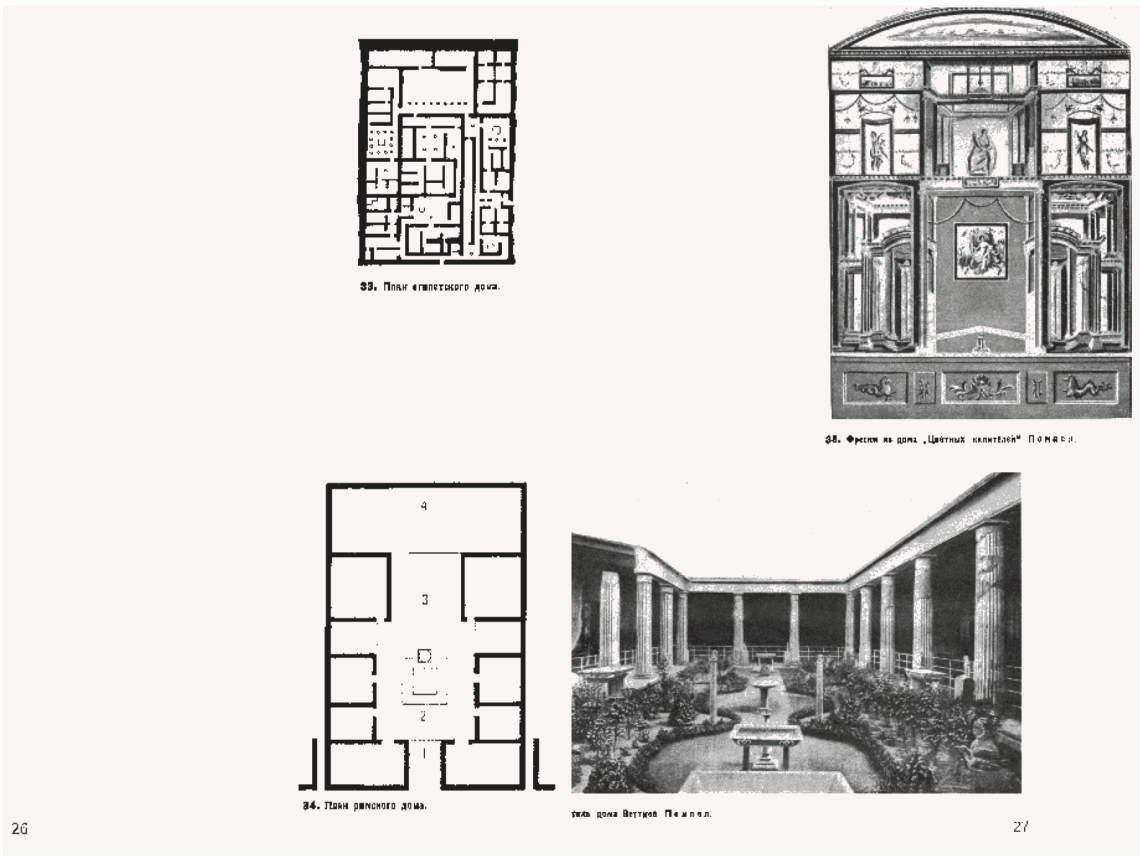

Spreads from chapter 'The Culture of Habitation'

The concept of a 'transitional type of dwelling' was born: Ginzburg suggested combining, in the same building, several apartment types, differing in the level of privacy, ranging from three- and two-room apartments for families with children to one-room apartments and dormitories for singles and childless couples. The sense of community was fostered by joint use of circulation areas, and communal spaces and facilities, such as dining halls, kitchens and bathrooms, to encourage residents accustomed to old, family-based, lifestyles, to transition to collective modes of living.

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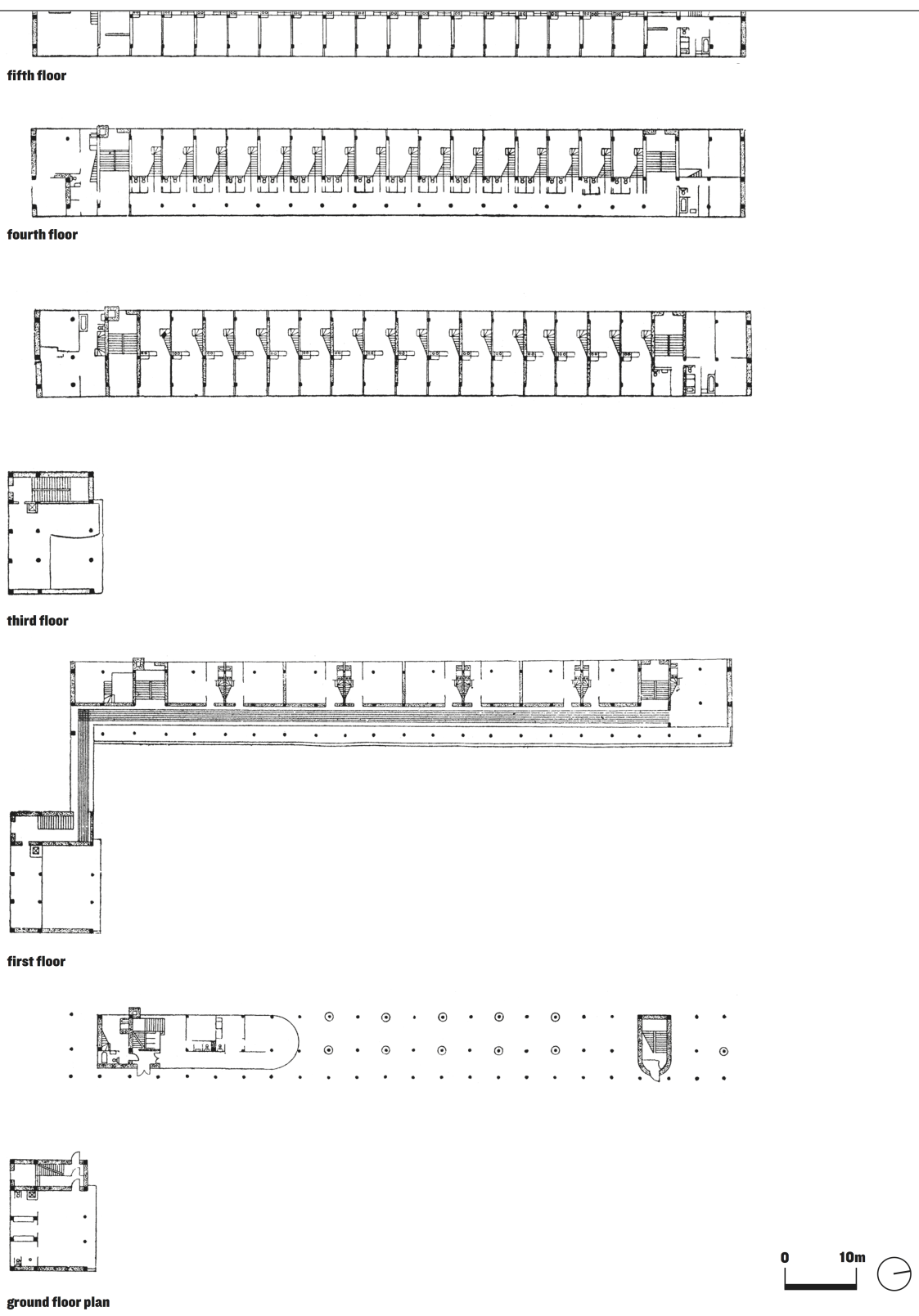

Narkomfin floor plans

The development of this concept was physically materialised in the Narkomfin, one of Stroikom's prototype buildings and today an icon of Soviet Modernism. It was designed by Ginzburg and his student Ignatii Milinis in 1928 for the People's Commissariat of Finance (Narkomfin) whose head, Nikolay Milyutin, Ginzburg's patron and himself a Narkomfin resident, espoused a deep interest in urbanism. Ginzburg describes the Narkomfin's design programme as a response to its social mission, with the building divided horizontally into two parts. Whereas the lower levels provided large apartments (type K) for families, the upper floors featured one-room apartments that encouraged more collectivised living, and the adjacent communal block (housing a gym, a kitchen and dining halls) served to 'facilitate a rapid and painless transition to higher social forms of housekeeping'. In the interior, low bedroom ceilings are made tolerable by the double height of living rooms, large windows allow architecture to reunite with nature, and the colour schemes – developed by Bauhaus designer Hinnerk Scheper, working in Moscow at that time – visually modify spatial arrangements and affect the energy balance of the residents.

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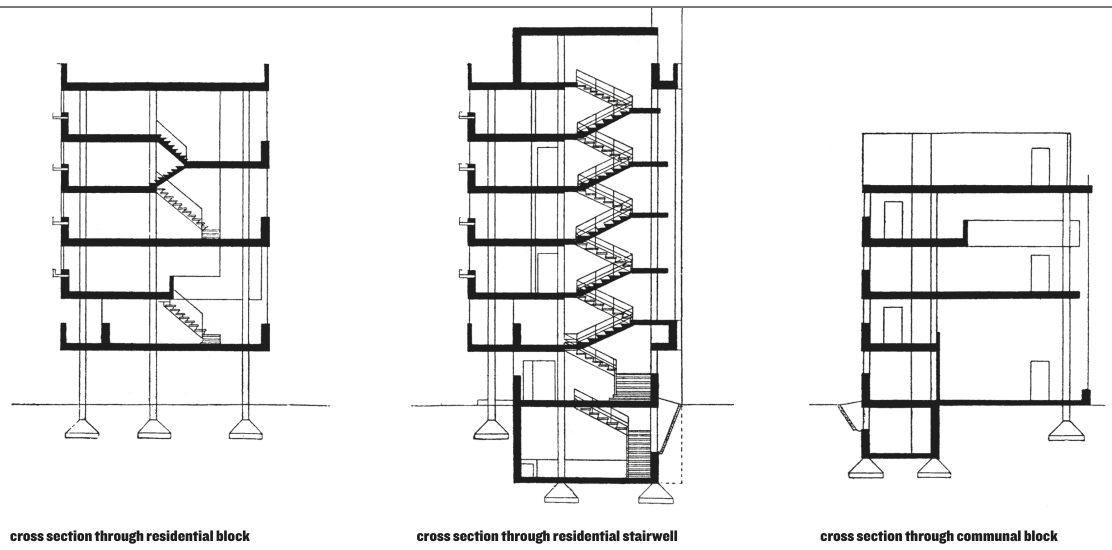
cross section through residential block
cross section through residential stairwell
cross section through communal block

Narkomfin sections

The design development of the Narkomfin resides in a wider critical discussion on the development of modes of collective living. Since 1925, Constructivist architects had participated in the debate on new types of living both in the pages of the journal *Sovremennaia Arkhitektura (Contemporary Architecture)* and within the Union of Contemporary Architects (OSA). In *Dwelling*, Ginzburg criticises the inhumanity of the early-Modernist radical concept of 'house-commune', whose icon the Narkomfin often serves, due to misunderstandings of Ginzburg's term 'social condenser'. Instead, he offers an example of his own earlier town-planning projects, such as the masterplan for Magnitogorsk, and the Green City (both 1929). He believed these, unlike the house-commune projects, aimed not to universalise and control the residents but to foster their personal development. Responding to the danger of dehumanisation inherent in standardised dwelling design, Ginzburg recommends detailed typification according to family and social type, and advocates the use of durable materials, the creation of a network of service centres allowing for decentralised collectivisation and careful zoning.

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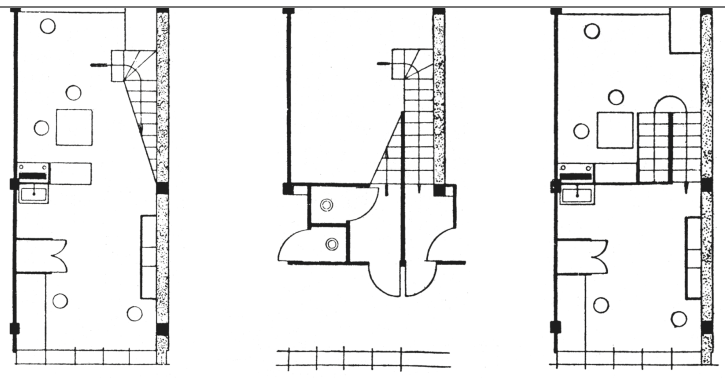
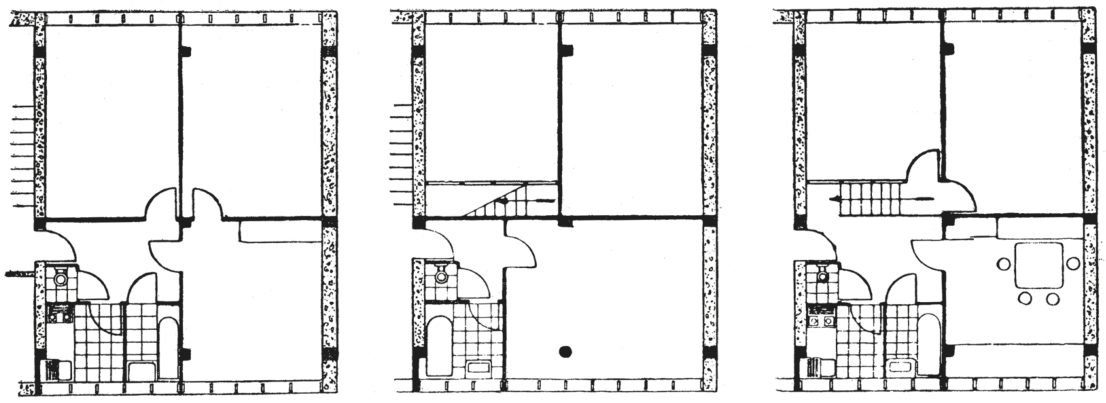
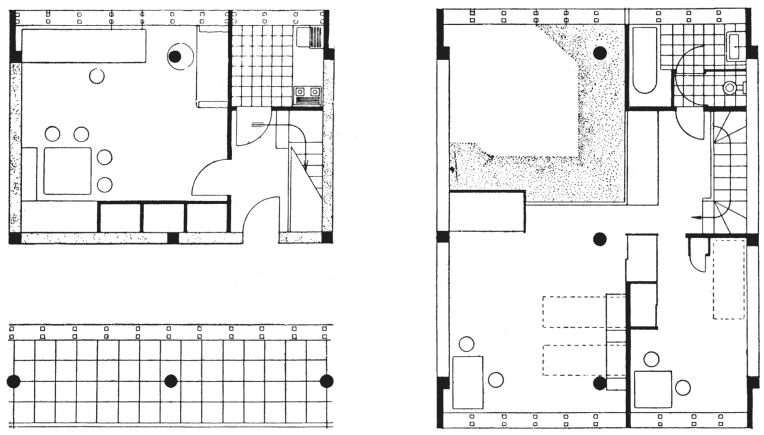


plans for type F apartments, third, fourth and fifth floors



plans for type 2-F apartments, third, fourth and fifth floors



plans for type K apartments, first and second floors

Narkomfin apartment type plans

Both timely and important for scholars and students of modern architecture, the translation of *Dwelling* into English fills a long-felt lacuna. It finally makes Ginzburg's voice heard against the backdrop of representations (and misrepresentations) of his intentions by others, giving a clue to the understanding of the Narkomfin building, and complicating the received style-centred notion of Soviet Constructivism. When Ginzburg's *Style and Epoch* (1923) was published by MIT Press in the Oppositions Books series in 1982, it immediately secured its author a position within the canon of modern and contemporary architectural theory – next to Adolf Loos, Aldo Rossi and Alan Colquhoun, whose writings appeared in the same series. This publication has been a blessing and a curse: on the one hand, distinguished by outstanding academic rigour (the text appeared in the translation of historian Anatole Senkevitch, with the foreword by Kenneth Frampton), it introduced the English-reading audience to Ginzburg's theoretical work, yet on the other, it offered a skewed perspective on this legacy, representing it by an early book concerned with stylistic debates along the lines of Le Corbusier's *Vers une Architecture*. Responding to the agenda of the Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies, responsible for the editorial work on the series, such a perspective presented Soviet Constructivism as, first and foremost, a style. Meanwhile, Ginzburg's other texts, along with his and his colleagues' different concerns and ideas, remained in the shadow of early stylistic battles. It is therefore gratifying finally to see Ginzburg's remaining major publications – *Rhythm in Architecture* (1923) and, most recently and importantly, *Dwelling* – appearing in English translations.

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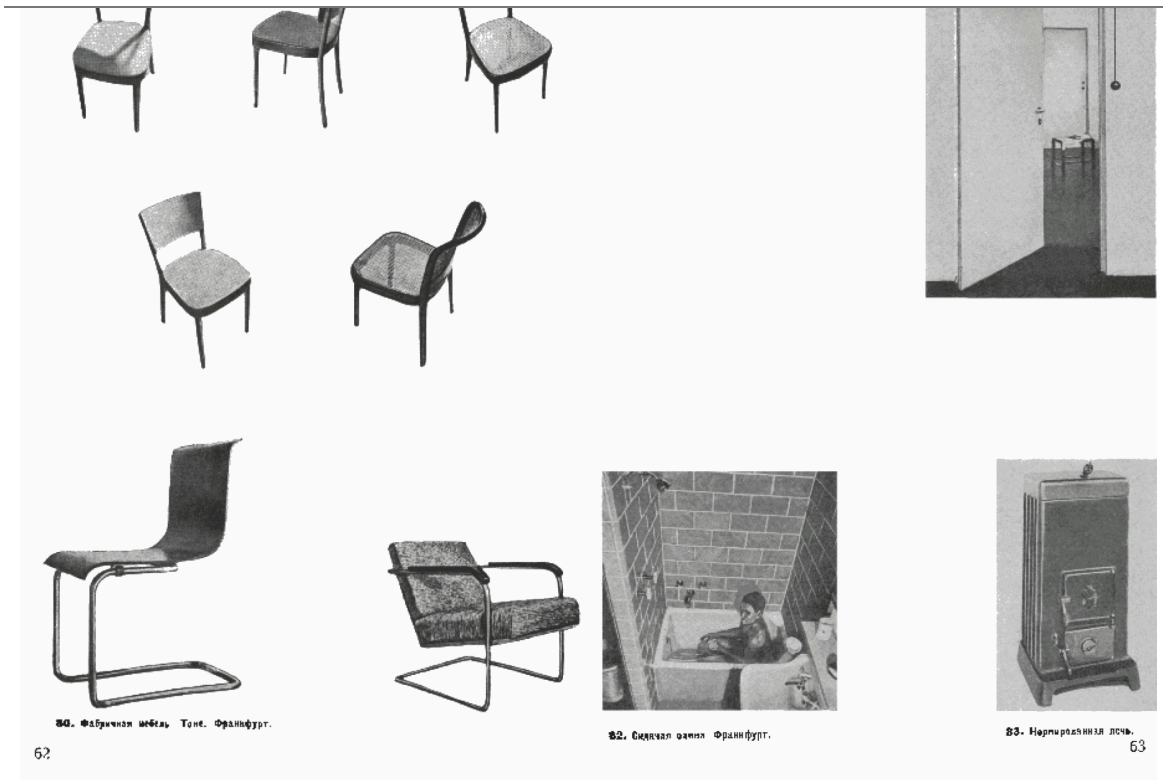

Spread from chapter 'The Culture of Habitation'

The design by Ginzburg Design Limited of the current translation follows the original layout and format of the book, reproducing all the many photographs, architectural drawings and plans, with which the original was illustrated. The proximity to the original is certainly one of the assets of the current edition. And the translation comes at the right time, hand in hand with the launch this year of the restoration of the Narkomfin, headed by Ginzburg's grandson Alexey Ginzburg, after decades of decay.

All visual material courtesy of Alexey Ginzburg and Natalia Shilova unless otherwise stated.

Dwelling: Five Years' Work on the Problem of the Habitation

Author: Moisei Ginzburg

Publisher: Fontanka

The English translation of 'Dwelling' is scheduled to go on sale in October 2017

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